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THE MEN WHO MADE ISRAEL

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THE JUDGES AND THE PREPARATION FOR THE KINGDOM

48. It is one thing for a people to conquer a land; it is another thing to settle down and make that land its home. Israel's first task was completed, but its second and more difficult problem remained to be solved. A people used to the wandering life of the desert must learn to dwell in one place. It must take on new activities, learn to till the soil, to exchange the sword for the plow, and to practice all the arts of agricultural and civilized life. New social relations with the old inhabitants must be created, former friendships and connections strengthened, new ties formed with those hitherto strangers. Israel must adjust its former customs, laws, political organization, and religious ideas and modes of worship to the demands of a different situation, for these had grown up during their desert life and were not adapted to people living quietly on farms or in cities. While all this was going on, the newcomers must protect themselves from attacks of enemies on their borders. It was no simple task that now confronted them.

49. There was much that favored them. The world-powers on the Nile and the Euphrates were still torn with internecine troubles and too weak to invade the lands on the Mediterranean coast. The great migrations of border peoples were over and the earlier invaders were engaged in the same task of settlement in new homes. As teachers in the strange studies of agriculture Israel had the peoples of Palestine, some of whom were already friendly and all familiar with the arts of settled and civilized life. Israel was not entering a wild, uncultivated region. As Jehovah said to them by the mouth of Joshua, "I gave you a land whereon thou hadst not labored and cities which ye built not, and ye dwell therein; of vineyards and olive yards, which ye planted not, do ye eat." On these cultivated lands as conquered serfs or as allies these inhabitants made Israel's intro-

duction to the new tasks easier. They introduced the newcomers to a higher culture, to industry and trade, to literature and art, to that civilization which Babylonia and Egypt had for many centuries spread so widely through the west-land. All this was of inestimable value in hastening Israel's advance. Nor was Israel itself without elements of strength. It was a conquering people, full of energy and resource, unrelaxed by the weakening influences of civilization, and possessed of a simple faith in Jehovah, the protector of his people and the guardian of justice. The memory of Moses and the Exodus was a mighty force to hold them together and to the achievement of the purpose to build up a national life in the Promised Land.

50. Yet the fact remained that they must adjust themselves to these new conditions and this drew severely on their strength and left them little to spare for defending themselves against enemies which might rise up to vex them. And now, when they were no longer united in one host under one leader but had separated to their several districts, they were the less able to offer a strong resistance and their weakness gave opportunity for attack. Thus it is no wonder that the history of Israel during this century (1150-1050 B. C.) was one long fierce struggle in which at times the people seemed well-nigh ready to perish. That they survived and came forth a nation was due to the coming forward of a series of leaders in different districts and tribes, who, strong for Jehovah, beat back their foes in his name and whose exploits kept alive courage and hope in the scattered sections of the people. These were the Judges. After generations dwelt upon these heroes and grouped them and their doings in the Book of Judges, one of the most picturesque and stirring books of the Old Testament.

51. Israel's tremendous onrush which had overwhelmed the Canaanites had not entirely broken their strength. This was especially true of the cities, centers of commerce, wealth, and culture. Their strong walls and war chariots had protected them. Two belts of these cities stretched right across the country from east to west, separating the tribes of Israel and weakening their power. One of these belts, on the south, had Jerusalem as its central stronghold and cut off Judah from its brethren. The other was made up of the cities in the plain of Esdraelon, from Bethshan to Megiddo. From these, in

course of time, a formidable assault was made upon Israel. Under the leadership of a chieftain, Sisera, the unity of Israel was utterly broken. All communication between the clans was cut off. The ancient spirit of conquest yielded to tame submission under a vigilant and active foe. The gods of Canaan triumphed over Jehovah. All that Joshua had won seemed lost. But the voice of Jehovah was heard in Israel speaking through Deborah, a woman, who in his name summoned Barak, a chieftain of Naphtali, a tribe whose seat lay north of the plain. Together they gathered the fighting men of Israel, ten thousand out of forty thousand, to battle for Jehovah. Men from Ephraim, Benjamin, Machir (a clan of Manasseh), Zebulun, and Issachar followed the chieftain of Naphtali to the conflict. The spirit of the Jehovah of the desert fell upon them; in a fierce onslaught they came down upon the foe. A sudden rain storm had raised the river Kishon and made the surrounding plain a sea of mud in which the Canaanite chariots were mired, and before they could free themselves Israel's rush had swept them away. It was a notable victory. Its story was told in one of the earliest and most famous lyrical ballads of Israel's literature, the song put in the mouth of Deborah, which, besides describing the battle, glorified the heroic deed of Jael, the Kenite woman, who with the tent hammer slew Sisera as fleeing from the field he came worn and weary to the door of her tent seeking rest and food. The poem ended with Jehovah's praise:

So let all thine enemies perish, O Jehovah;
And let them that love him be as the sun when he goeth
forth in his might.

52. The battle of the Kishon broke the power of the Canaanites of the North, but other enemies disputed Israel's possession. The peoples on the other side of the Jordan invaded the land. Eglon, king of Moab, crossed the Jordan at Jericho and levied tribute on the country round about. But a valiant Benjamite, Ehud, after bringing him a present, made his way secretly into the king's presence, stabbed him to death, and escaped to bring news of the king's death and summon his brethren to battle. They followed him to victory and the driving-out of Moab. When the Ammonites oppressed Israel east of the Jordan, a hero arose in Jephthah, who had been

driven out from his father's house and was an outlaw. In their extremity his brethren called him back and made him their chief. He led them out against Ammon, won a decisive victory over them, and delivered his people.

53. Another and severer crisis with more important results was brought about by the invasion of Manasseh and Ephraim by the Midianites. These two strong tribes occupied the center of the western plateau where they were cultivating their farms in peace and prosperity. But now from across the Jordan through the Esdraelon plain came these invaders from the desert at the season of harvest to pillage their crops and carry away the spoil. For seven years their inroads continued until courage and hope had well-nigh died out in the hearts of these Israelites. All prospect of advance in unity and property was lost. Then Jehovah called Gideon to the rescue. The full and lively narrative of his exploits preserved in the Book of Judges is evidently based on a variety of tales which were everywhere told at Israelite firesides in the latter days. Gideon was the son of an obscure chieftain of one of the clans of Manasseh at the time when the tribe was brought low by these Midianite inroads. Not daring to thresh his little store of wheat on the threshing-floor at the top of the hill where he would be seen by the enemy, he was working over it in the wine-press when Jehovah appeared to him and bade him deliver his people. He could not believe that it was he who could lead in this work, and only when his doubts were removed by wondrous signs wrought by Jehovah did he undertake it. Filled with Jehovah's spirit and in his name he called for followers. One story tells us that more than thirty thousand men responded from Manasseh, Asher, Zebulun, and Naphtali. But he tested them and retained only three hundred. With these in a night attack he fell upon the host of the Midianites in the plain with the war-cry "The sword of Jehovah and of Gideon," threw them into confusion, and drove them in headlong flight across the Jordan. Their chiefs were captured and slain by Gideon himself in blood revenge for the murder of his own kinsmen. Out of the great spoil of gold he made an ephod, probably an image of Jehovah, and set it up in a shrine in his own village of Ophrah.

54. This valorous deed of Gideon gave him great prestige. We

are told that on the strength of it he was invited by Israel to be their king. The sense of the value of stronger organization as a defense against enemies was growing among the people. Gideon refused the honor, but maintained till his death a leading position in his tribe. The sons of his many wives were ambitious and on his death one of them, Abimelech, son of a Canaanite woman, slew all his brethren except one, Jotham, and set up a kingdom in Shechem. But after three years troubles broke out and in one of the battles that followed Abimelech was slain and his kingdom perished with him.

55. The most picturesque of these stories deals with the adventures of Samson and introduces upon the scene a new foe of Israel—the Philistines. The origin and early history of the Philistines has already been told (§ 39). Earlier in the field and in a far more favorable position for rapid progress in wealth and power, they soon began to expand and push their way northward up the coast-plain and eastward to the mountain border of Israel. Here on the edge of the hills lay the tribe of Dan which began to suffer severely from their advance. At first the relations were friendly, but soon the pressure of Philistine power began to be felt and border warfare arose. In the midst of it appeared the Danite champion, Samson. The stories of his doings that passed current in Israel were a strange combination of the humorous, the rude, and the heroic. But at their heart they record the impress made by a strong personality upon his time, and reflect wonderfully the spirit and life of the age. Samson was the son of Manaoh, a child of promise, set apart for Jehovah's service from his birth as a Nazirite. The outward marks of his consecration were that his hair was never to be cut and he was to drink no wine. He early became conscious of the possession of immense strength which, when the spirit of Jehovah came upon him, was irresistible. He would slay Philistines by the hundreds with any weapon which came to hand. He inflicted all kinds of mischief on them and when by guile they made him captive he burst his bonds and escaped. At last they cut off his hair while he slept and bound him, and when he awoke he found his strength gone. His eyes were put out and he was made a slave. But on a great festival day when he was brought out to be mocked by his captors, Jehovah gave him back his strength and, seizing the pillars of the temple, he brought the house down in

destruction upon the heads of his enemies; "so the dead that he slew at his death were more than they that he slew in his life."

56. Such were the men who fought for Jehovah in the days of Israel's settlement. They were called judges and in later times were thought of as succeeding one another in the headship of Israel and exercising the powers that the judge of more civilized ages possessed. This could hardly be the case. Israel was no organized, united people at that time. The stories of the judges show them to be little more than leaders of clans or tribes raised up to meet some critical situation in their own districts and gaining some local fame by their exploits. Yet there was more in what they did. Their deeds, of quite local and temporary moment in themselves, were the outcome of a spirit greater than their own, the spirit of Israel's religion, the spirit of Jehovah, with which they felt themselves possessed. By virtue of that they called their brethren to follow them. They kept alive the remembrance of Israel's God. The tales of their deeds, carried from clan to clan, awakened in all parts of Israel the memories of the past and the hopes which these memories stirred. So they did their part to save Israel at a time when it could be saved only by heroic valor inspired by religion.

57. They were not patterns for us either of morals or religion. They were men of a rude and iron age when every man "did that which was right in his own eyes." Israel was struggling for existence and only the strong could survive. Deeds of violence and treachery, robbery and murder, were common. Tribes of the same blood fought with each other and the strongest of the judges could not hold more than a few of them together for long. Religion, not seldom sanctified cruelty, was the inspiration to valor and warfare rather than to goodness and right. When the "spirit of Jehovah" fell upon Samson, he slew his enemies.

58. During all this wild time Israel was growing and learning. Contact with the old inhabitants led to union. Earlier relations broken off during Israel's sojourn in Egypt were revived. Hence it is probable that these years saw the completion of that tribal organization of Israel which was by later writers, as has been indicated, drawn up in a genealogical scheme and connected with the twelve sons of Jacob (§ 19). In fact, that scheme has been thought to reflect

the changes and relations which the settlement in Palestine brought about. Thus, for example, the sons of the concubines are regarded as tribes that appeared in this time, and were largely made up of Canaanites taken up into the Israelite body. This is specially likely in the case of Dan and Asher. The youngest son, Benjamin, was a tribe made up from Ephraim, as its position on the southern border of Ephraim's territory suggests. That Reuben was the eldest son indicates that the tribe of Reuben was once the leader of Israel at the beginning, a position which was yielded to the tribe of Joseph because Reuben settled down on the east of Jordan and did not take part in the western movement. The failure of Simeon and Levi to obtain districts in Palestine is connected with the story of their attack on Shechem told in Genesis, chap. 34. In Jacob's blessing they are severely rebuked for this and it is thought that in the wars that followed they were well-nigh destroyed. Simeon never recovered, but Levi reappeared as a tribe of priests without possessing any land in Palestine. Judah's small part in the conquest and subsequent struggles is due to its separation from the other tribes by the belt of Canaanite cities (§ 51), and also to its absorption of a number of non-Israelite clans among which that of Caleb the Kenite is specially mentioned. Out of the obscure conflicts of the time the tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh gained the leading place, due to their position in Egypt (§ 21), and also to their possessing the favored situation on the western plateau. Whatever may be our view of these suggestive theories, the fact remains that from this period of settlement Israel came forth as the one people of Palestine, its various parts clearly defined and strong.

59. But Israel had not only grown; it had learned much during this century. The problems set before it at the beginning (§ 48) were nearing solution. By inheritance from the Canaanites and amalgamation with them it had acquired the arts of agriculture. The storms of war had not altogether hindered the slow growth of a higher civilization among the tribes. The most striking proof of this is seen in literature. That such poetry as the Song of Deborah belongs to this age, and such prose as the fable of Jotham, shows that a new life had been awakened. The former is the finest product of many lyrics of heroism which passed from mouth to

mouth among the people and were collected and written down in a later age.

60. Israel's religion also grew in these years. At first sight and in view of the atrocities of the age this seems incredible. It is true that the moral descent seems serious when we compare Moses with Gideon or Jephthah. But we forget the problem to be solved. Jehovah, god of the desert, lord of wandering Israel, must now become transformed into a god of another world, of agriculture, of cultivated land, lord of a settled people with new interests. He must be worshiped in other shrines and in other ways. He came into competition with gods of Canaan. It was a conflict of gods as well as of peoples that took place when Israel entered Canaan. And as Israel took Canaanites up into their tribes, so they must take their religions and adjust them to their own. In this process, too, they triumphed, although at times all seemed lost. Jehovah became God of Canaan, of its fields, its groves and its springs, worshiped in its holy places in forms which had long been used to worship the deities of Canaan. But he remained God of Israel as it had been taught by Moses to regard him. The past was not forgotten. As friend and savior of Israel he called the heroes to deliver his people, and the remembrance of the Red Sea and the passage of the Jordan was a bond of union which held the scattered fragments together when all other bonds had been severed. Nor was his guardianship of justice forgotten although in the tumult of the time it was weakened and obscured. Foul deeds aroused indignation in Israel and were punished in Jehovah's name. In this age the tribe of Levi to which Moses belonged seems to have been the guardian of the Mosaic tradition and appeared as special ministers of Jehovah at the local shrines. The ark of Jehovah was venerated at Shiloh in Ephraim's land, and the time was coming when again it would be the visible token of Jehovah's presence and the rallying-point of the people.

61. Israel was also learning the need and the value of organization. Israel had come into Canaan a union of tribes, conscious of a common kinship and of a common service of one God. Moses, as Jehovah's representative and the appointed leader, had trained the people to act together and had been to them the center and soul of a new national life. But Moses was gone and Joshua had not been able to

keep them one in the conquest and division of the land. Soon everything that made for union was lost in their struggles to gain possession of their separate districts and in their amalgamation with the inhabitants. But the conflicts which arose with outsiders revived their memories of the past unity and led them to make efforts toward restoring it. These were at first weak and futile. They could not go back to the old tribal unity for they were a settled people. The common tie of religion was a stronger force and hence arose the judges who in the name of Jehovah summoned them to join together for common defense. Yet we have seen how some of the tribes could not be moved to united action even by this motive. But they had come into a land where the ordinary form of organization was the city with its king. Hence they would be tempted, each locality to set up a separate state for itself. The result of the remembrance of the old unity and the example of the city kingdoms of the Canaanites was to lead them to combine both in a monarchy which would cover as many of the tribes as possible. So the kingdom of Gideon and his house appeared in Manasseh. It represented a higher and better form of political organization than any that had yet appeared. But it was not strong enough to endure. Some greater impulse was needed before Israel was to realize its unity and to stand as a well-knit nation among the nations around it. That impulse was already beginning to be felt as the age of the Judges was passing away. Jehovah was preparing the man and the opportunity which should bring about a new and more successful movement toward national organization.